

## **HJ Interview**

IR: Thank you for taking part in this interview. Can you start by introducing yourself and when you came here?

HJ: I am HJ, I am 30 years old and I have been here since 2015, that is 9 years I guess, or 8 years.

IR: What is your level of education and which part of Eritrea did you come from?

HJ: I attended primary school back home and I am from Assab, the port town.

IR: Tell me the types of digital devices you are familiar with and how often you use them.

HJ: I have this Samsung phone, and that is it.

IR: Which features, software, or applications do you use your mobile phone for?

HJ: I use it for direct calls, it has everything that I need.

IR: Which apps do you have?

HJ: I have WhatsApp, Telegram, IMO, Messenger, TikTok, Instagram

IR: Do you have DigID?

HJ: Of course, I do. I use DigID for pretty much everything. To access something from the municipality, health insurance, and everything. And I have the Digig app.

IR: What does integration mean for you?

HJ: For me, I understand integration in terms of having a good relationship or interaction with Dutch people. So for that, you will have to be good with their language. And that is how I understand it.

IR: And so far how was the integration process for you?

HJ: I am struggling (chuckles) the language is very difficult for me. With the language, I can hear and understand somehow, but speaking is what is difficult for me. Also maybe I haven't been hardworking enough myself, maybe.

IR: Have digital skills played a role in your integration process? If so, can you elaborate on how? Do you feel that digital technologies have helped or hindered your integration into Dutch society? Can you provide specific examples?

HJ: Well, I am not much integrated in that sense, but I think these technologies like WhatsApp are helpful to communicate with them. But, in some way even though I am not much in contact with the Dutch people, technology is helpful.

IR: How do you currently use digital technologies to access information about your rights and obligations as a refugee in the Netherlands?

HJ: Well, it is through different contacts with the government and the social workers that I learned about my rights and what I should do. When I first came to the Netherlands, they gave us orientation. Also later on in the language course, and different situations when you come in contact with them.

IR: Have you used any digital tools or resources to learn Dutch or other languages? How effective have these been?

HJ: Yes, in the course I used computers and YouTube to help me learn the language. They also took us to different events and trips while we were learning the language.

IR: Have you encountered any challenges using digital technologies in the Netherlands, such as language barriers or lack of access to technology? How have you overcome these challenges, if at all?

HJ: As you know and as you can see everything is digital here. And it is totally different from where we come from, for me and for my friends. You won't be doing things that you want to do because of language or because you can't properly use technology. So you will definitely miss some opportunities or you won't be able to do things that you want to do.

IR: How have you overcome these challenges, if at all?

HJ: There is this organization called Diburt? [unintelligible]. You have to make an appointment, go to their office with the stuff that you needed help with and they help you with these digital technology issues. If there is something that you have to pay or something that you have to process, they help with literally anything that is difficult for you to do.

IR: Do you use any online platforms or apps to connect with other refugees or people from your home country? How has this affected your sense of community and belonging in the Netherlands?

HJ: I use Messenger and WhatsApp mainly.

IR: How has this affected your sense of community and belonging in the Netherlands?

HJ: I actually feel like I am at home here, because there is the language barrier and you struggle with everything. But having people from your country here with you, and being able to communicate with them easily, makes life here a bit easier amid everything that happens to you.

IR: Have you had the opportunity to interact with Dutch people or participate in Dutch social events? Have you used any digital tools or platforms to connect with Dutch people or participate in Dutch social events?

HJ: No not at all. There were some efforts at the beginning, like about six years ago, to help participate in cultural exchange events and programs. But now, I don't even have contact with any Dutch person.

I will be honest with you, especially in the last two years I haven't even seen a Dutch person (laughing). I see them if I go to a certain office or something but except for that, no.

IR: You mean you only see Eritreans here?

HJ: No, all other people but Dutch people. Arabs, Moroccans, Indians, and other Africans. So in a way, it is like I am in my country like I am in Asmara (laughing).

No offense though.

IR: Have you been able to find employment since arriving in the Netherlands? If not, what are the challenges you face in finding a job?

HJ: Yes, I worked sporadically.

IR: What are the challenges you face in finding a job?

HJ: People say language is a problem and so on, but for me, you can even work without the language in some places. But for us, we lean towards the other thing,

IR: What is that?

HJ: Like working informally.

IR: Have you used any online platforms or resources to search for job opportunities?

HJ: No not online, I find work through other people.

Brokers, they can be Eritreans or Sudanese, whatever. But it is through them that you find work, I haven't used online technology.

IR: Have you received any support or training to develop digital skills related to job search or job performance?

HJ: Yes I worked for six months before.

IR: Is that work or training?

HJ: Work and training combined, three days a week for six months.

IR: What was it about?

HJ: Organizing, sorting, and arranging clothes and accessories. So it was basically working and training at the same time.

IR: Do you feel that digital skills are important in accessing basic services in the Netherlands? Have you used any digital tools or resources to help you navigate the Dutch system and access these services?

HJ: Absolutely, digital skills are very important in accessing services in the Netherlands. I use the ING bank app to make payments, and see balances. I have a health insurance app that I use for my appointments, claim a refund, and so on. Electricity and gas bills are automatically billed from my account.

IR: Have you faced any challenges in accessing basic services such as healthcare, education, or housing in the Netherlands?

HJ: Oh it is extremely difficult for a person from our country to navigate through everything here. You know the differences in technology and in the way we were brought up. You really need support and guidance. They would ask you to do this and that on the Internet, I can't do them all by myself. There was a time when I had to pay a 600 Euro fine because I missed making a payment on time. I had a three years contract for electricity back then, and I stopped it in my second year assuming it has come to an end. Then they made me pay extra 600 Euros which was a fine. That happened because of the language challenge and because I was not able to see information for myself on the Internet. There was also a time I had to pay extra because the payment was to be made using a digital means, I didn't know how to and I paid the punishment. It was around 300 Euros, and the scariest part about this stuff is that if you failed to pay on time, due to whatever reason, no one cares about your reason. They would come and take your property. They would take anything that amounts to the money you owe them. Extra payments and fines are quite common, for insurance, municipality payments subscriptions, and everything. This is all because, things are going digital, in applications and we can't do them all. Let me share with you a story of a friend who came here the same year as me. So, a lot of contacts in this country are made via email or they would



ask you to do something on the internet, instead of the postal letters. This poor guy, he doesn't know much about the internet or other digital tasks. So, for this poor friend, a debt that he was not aware of was accumulating. Then, they confiscated his belongings, and even then his debt would not be covered. Then he was forced to leave his house and he ended up becoming homeless. He became out of all the services and benefits in the country. So he is basically homeless, and crashes the couch of friends, asking for 10 or 5 euros. I know him healthy and in good condition. What happened to him? Who is responsible for his situation? So because of factors like these, people develop psychological problems and stress. Why are they getting into addiction? Why are they killing themselves or others? Why is so much stress? The journey refugees have been through is enough of a stress and trauma by itself. There was a guy who committed suicide in Amsfort and was found in his place after three days. There are many things. These are all because of the stress. Things should be made easier to navigate and understand. So, training and skills program for refugees should be considered.

IR: Have you had any opportunities to attend digital skills training programs or workshops in the Netherlands? If so, can you describe your experience and how it has benefited you?

HJ: No, training. If you have issues or need help with a certain service, digital mediated service mostly, there is this organization [Debrt VVN?]. But apart from that there is no education or training whatsoever.

IR: Are there any specific digital skills or areas of knowledge that you feel would be particularly valuable for your integration into Dutch society? Why?

HJ: What could that be? We don't use email in my country. But here, wherever you go they would ask if you have an email. It is all about emails. Some of them would even say, if you don't have an email, we won't send you a post mail. This is extremely difficult.

IR: What kind of support or resources do you think would be beneficial in helping refugees like yourself in the Netherlands improve their digital skills and enhance their integration?

HJ: I told you earlier about the organization that helps us do things or solve our issues. They don't show us how to do it, they just solve whatever issue that you have. So we, face a lot of challenges due to this. Another point I would like to make is that we are not all the same, we are different in background, the way we were brought up, the country we come from, and everything, culture. We shouldn't be treated as if we are the same. Even if you stay here for 10 years, that doesn't mean you will get everything. It is just difficult. So, training in digital technology and how to use them would be so helpful. Also, the language is very difficult. Another issue, which is

very much related to our case as a community is, we have people expecting from us, and all you want to do is to start working as soon as possible and have something. Starting from myself, what is in our mind is not education or something but changing ourselves financially. Why do you think all these getting into drug problems or criminal activities? Because reality and what we have imagined is completely different. So that creates stress, and many people end up in drugs or casinos. They have been through a lot, and have seen many horrible things and paid their life in Libya and came here and things may not be as good as you expect them to be. This affects mental health and I think it is the reason why people don't integrate here. On the other hand, you see them (the Dutch, government) doing things for us to integrate quickly. But we can't, we are somehow stuck. Other communities like the Arabs might be better in many aspects when it comes to integration. I think this is the main problem.

IR: Is there anything else you would like to add or share about your experience with digital skills and integration?

HJ: Not much, I just wanted to emphasize the importance of training and language. The language training we get is very basic, just basic communication. You can't do much with that. As to the [Debrt VVN?], they solve your instant issue and you will go back another day. One day I asked her to show me how to do it myself and she said, I don't have time. I understand her, I am not blaming her, there were others waiting for help. Their office is super busy with a lot of people lining up to get help with their

issues. They could have given us training on how to do these things and make everyone's life a little better. But the system shouldn't be that way. Every time something that I have to complete online comes, I get stressed. Sometimes I get a fine. I can't emphasize this enough.